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ABSTRACT

A gross injustice is an act perpetrated on students by a college instructor which is unfair, unjust, inconsiderate, or inequitable. A series of discussions with undergraduate students at a medium-sized midwestern university revealed the existence of 23 discrete injustices. Interviews were held with 229 students to determine the frequency, seriousness, and effect of each injustice. The most frequently encountered 16 injustices dealt with a generally capricious attitude toward students' concerns. Ratings of frequency and perceived seriousness were equally distributed between these two categories, and show that the injustices occur with sufficient frequency and are perceived to be sufficiently serious to justify the attention of those concerned with collegiate instruction. Use of this type of data in formative and summative evaluation schemata and in analyzing student behavior is discussed. (Author)

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THE NATURE, FREQUENCY AND SERIOUSNESS OF PERCEIVED GROSS INJUSTICES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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THE NATURE, FREQUENCY, AND SERIOUSNESS OF PERCEIVED GROSS INJUSTICES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Increasingly, students are asked to rate their college instructors since the students are in an excellent position to report directly on what occurs in a classroom. The format for such reporting is typically a short answer, machine scored evaluation instrument dealing with issues such as instructor methodology and enthusiasm, course content and other general satisfaction data; a plethora of such evaluation instruments exists. These instruments are valuable sources of student input for both formative and summative purposes as far as they go. But do they go far enough? Perhaps not.

Past research (Cohen and Berger, 1971; McKeachie, 1970; Mann, 1969; and Solomon, Bezdek and Rosenberg, 1963) has indeed shown that students learn more from instructors who exhibit certain traits such as the ability to give clear explanations, organize a class, stimulate intellectual curiosity, give interesting presentations and other expected similar behaviors. Many existing evaluation instruments have been developed using these traits as a basis for their content. Yet, there are significant negative behaviors sometimes engaged in by college instructors which are extremely bothersome to students

and often an embarrassment to the profession. These behaviors do not easily fit into the typical categories of content found in existing evaluation instruments. Rather, they seem to override these categories. They are a "fifth column" of concerns which permeate the instructional scene by influencing the attitudes of students toward instructors and instruction. These are behaviors which students consider unjust or unfair, such as an instructor's requiring a student to purchase a book---perhaps an expensive one---and then never using it as part of the course. Such behaviors are referred to in this study as "gross injustices."* A gross injustice is defined as an act perpetrated upon students by a college instructor which is unfair, unjust, inconsiderate or inequitable and which takes advantage of the instructor-student relationship.

What causes this phenomenon, the existence of gross injustices? One needs to examine the unusual nature of the student/instructor relationship in a college setting. It is often a pleasant relationship where students'

*The term "gross injustice" is attributed to Michael Scriven who conceived of the ascertainment of such acts as an index of poor faculty performances for potential use in faculty evaluations at the University of California, Berkeley.

academic needs, both cognitive and affective, are met completely and a high degree of satisfaction is felt on the part of the student. For instructors who are a party to such a relationship, course evaluations are usually not needed; the existence of any instructor-perpetrated injustices, gross or otherwise, is minimal. It must be noted however, that the very nature of the relationship between college student and instructor is characterized by a great deal of absolute control over the student by the instructor. This allows for the possibility of exploitation of the authority relationship by those few instructors who are unthinking, uncaring, incompetent, disinterested or perhaps, kindly, just ignorant of what constitutes fair play. Power corrupts... It is under these conditions that gross injustices develop, indeed flourish.

What do some instructors do that justifiably offends students? What excesses take place? Specifically, what are these acts that students perceive as unfair, inconsiderate, or inequitable? And how do students feel about them? Answers to these questions may help us to understand more clearly the behavior of instructors from their student's point of view. The potential usefulness of this knowledge is great. It was in the spirit of honest, open inquiry that this study was conceived and executed.

Method

The investigators arranged a series of seven meetings to be held with diverse groups of undergraduate students at a medium sized midwestern university. The meetings took place at noon time at the student residence dining areas. Usually five to seven students were in attendance. About forty students participated in these luncheon sessions; these students represented a cross-section of students with regard to age, class, sex, major, etc. A special meeting with a group of off-campus students was held also. Students were told the purpose of the study and were asked to cite instances from their personal experiences of unfair, unjust, or shabby treatment received from their collegiate instructors. After an initial reluctance to discuss these issues, and after having been reassured of their anonymity and the potential usefulness of their remarks, the students related a variety of experiences. They were encouraged to be very specific as to the acts which were perpetrated. These meetings yielded hundreds of experiences which were ultimately reduced to 23 reasonably discrete behaviorally stated gross injustices.

An interview schedule was developed in order to systematically survey a sample of the undergraduate student population. First, descriptive data (sex, class, GPA, major field of study) was elicited. Then each respondent was asked if he/she had experienced each injustice. If the respondent answered "yes" he/she was probed as to 1) how often it had happened 2) how serious it was considered and 3) what effect it had on the student.

The survey was conducted through a student affairs research office. Ten student interviewers previously employed by the office, who were experienced in telephone surveys, were trained to conduct the interviews. A sample of 358 students was randomly selected from the undergraduate student population. Two hundred twenty-nine (64% of the sample) students were actually contacted and interviewed by telephone.

Student responses were coded, and frequency distributions and cross-tabulations were developed using the program from the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). These data were further analyzed as indicated in the findings below.

Findings

All twenty-three injustices had been experienced by some students in the sample. The range of percentage of students who experienced these injustices was 56 per cent to 7 per cent with a median percentage of 27.1. The seven injustices with the lowest percentages of occurrence (20% or fewer students) were dropped from the analysis. This yielded a revised list of sixteen injustices with percentages of students who experienced them ranging from 56 per cent to 24 per cent (median percentage: 29.5.) These sixteen injustices were used for all subsequent analyses. Table 1 lists the sixteen injustices in order of the number of students experiencing each. The assigned category is also indicated as explained below.

(Table 1 about here)

Primary Categorization

A primary analysis divided the sixteen injustices into categories as follows:

I. Behaviors reflecting instructional incompetence

   A. Instructional incompetence reflected in inability to deliver course content (items 2, 3, 4, 7, 11, 13).

Students apparently expect instructors to instruct. The behaviors in this category indicate an abrogation of an unwritten, unspoken contract which exists between instructor and student, viz, the instructor delivers the course and the student receives it. Two items (2, 4) deal with a poor use of time: one item (2) shows use of time for presenting information not germane to the course, the other item (4) indicates time mismanagement. Three other items (3, 11, 13) deal with instructional procedures: one item (3) shows the presence of a poor instructional procedure, the other items (11, 13) shows the absence of a good one. A fifth item in this subcategory (7) shows a violation of an implicit "truth in packaging" expection. From the students' point of view, the label and picture on the box sometimes does not indicate accurately the type of cereal on the inside.

B. Instructional incompetence reflected in an insensitivity toward students' feelings (items 9, 10, 14)

Students apparently expect to be treated with dignity and courtesy. They expect a measure of good form to accompany the delivery of course content. One item (9) shows instructors lacking discretion in talking about their students. Another item (10) shows

instructors encouraging students to participate in class and then having sport with them----clearly a case of dirty pool. A third item (14) shows instructors demeaning the intellectual capabilities of their students.

II. Behaviors reflecting unfairness to students (items 1, 5, 6, 8, 12, 15, 16)

Students are highly critical of what they consider to be arbitrary or capricious treatment at the hands of instructors. They resent cavalier treatment of their concerns; they see this as an abuse of power. Three items (1, 15, 16) deal with perceived inequities in grading matters. Items 1 and 15 show a lack of agreement as to the ground rules for grading procedures. Item 16 shows an unwillingness on the part of instructors to allow a student access to the criteria which would enable the student to challenge the instructor's decision. It is of interest that these three items were rated among the most serious by the students. The four remaining items show a lack of understanding and appreciation of students' problems in the areas of finances (5), time demands (6), course expectation (8), and personal time needs.

Secondary Categorizations

Several items extracted from both major categories reflect certain personal qualities found in instructors.

Items 2 and 12, if engaged in by the same instructor, reveal a measure of egocentricity which at once demands a captive audience (12) and then subjects the audience to personal dialogue which is not germane to the course (2). Items 9 and 10 show instructors making points at their students' expense by indiscretion in their comments (9) and setting up students in order to take cheap shots at them (10). Items 11 and 13 show an instructional ineptitude which by itself is not necessarily so bad but when not faced openly demonstrates an unfortunate insecurity and lack of leadership qualities.

Several items show a poor or inadequate concept of classroom management. Items 4, 5, and 8 show a lack of long range operational planning resulting in inconvenience and bad feelings among students. Items 6, 7, and 14 also show mismanagement but rather than being at the operational level these items reflect an absence of department or collegiate policy. Perhaps blame (if appropriate) for these behaviors ought not to be leveled at the instructors as much as at the policy making mechanism under which they operate.

Frequency

The students who had indicated that they had experienced a given injustice were queried further as to the frequency with which the injustice was encountered. The responses were coded on a four point scale ranging from "Very Frequently" through "Very Infrequently". Responses of "at least once per quarter" were coded Very Frequently, responses of "more than once per year but less than one per quarter" were coded Frequently. Table 2 shows a revised listing of the sixteen injustices in order of the number of students responding as having experienced each Very Frequently or Frequently.

(Table 2 about here)

Inspection of these data show a range of percentages from 49 per cent to 13 per cent with a median percentage of 29. Items from each of the primary categorizations are more or less evenly distributed over the list although there is a slight tendency of class mismanagement items to appear high on the list.

Seriousness

The students who had indicated that they had experienced a given injustice were also queried as to how serious they perceived the injustice to be. They

responded on a three point scale: Very Serious, Moderately Serious, and Not Serious. Table 3 shows a revised listing of the sixteen injustices in the order of the number of students rating each as Very Serious or Moderately Serious.

(Table 3 about here)

Inspection of these data show a range of percentages from 93 per cent to 59 per cent with a median percentage of 74. Here again as was the case with the frequency variable above, the items from each of the primary categorizations seem to be distributed evenly over the list.

Crosstabulations

Further analysis of the data was conducted by crosstabulating three student attributes with the sixteen injustices. A few findings are worthy of note.

1) Sex. Women tended to rate injustices as being more serious than did men, especially those items dealing with surprise test items (1), non-course dialogue in the class (2), class time mismanagement (4), and never used books (5).

2) Academic class. The higher the class, the more injustices experienced, e.g. Seniors reported having experienced more injustices than Juniors, Juniors more

than Sophomores, etc.

3) Academic achievement (GPA). Overall, the sixteen injustices were reported to have been experienced to a similar degree by students at all levels of achievement. However, high GPA students (A or B level) reported a hicher incidence of faculty speaking negatively about students (9) than did low GPA students. Also the high GPA students rated the injustice dealing with not knowing the criteria for evaluation (16) as being more serious than did the low GPA students. The low GPA students reported a higher incidence of having their grades lowered because of excessive absences (15) than did the higher GPA students.

Student Reactions

The students who had indicated they had experienced a given injustice were queried further as to the effect the injustice had had upon them. For most injustices, more than half of the students reported that they did nothing in response to the injustice--- they ignored it. The remainder of the students reported actions which were distributed over a wide range of options.

On those injustices dealing with matters of grading or work requirements (1, 6, 16) approximately 40 per cent of the students brought their concerns to the attention of their instructors. However, only one

fourth of these students reported that the situation improved after that. On those injustices dealing with class activities---content and method (2, 3, 7, 10, 12) from 26 to 55 per cent of the students reported having lost interest in the course as a result. Ten per cent of the students dropped a course due to perceived unwarranted work requirements (6); 19 per cent dropped a course when their instructor recommended it (14). One injustice dealing with the incongruity of course content and catalogue description (7) caused a few students to change their major.

Discussion

This exploratory study has sought to determine systematically certain kinds of actions, gross injustices, perpetrated by college instructors on their students. The actions elicited reflect a wide variety of problems in the college instructional scene, such as misunderstandings between instructor and students, abuse of power by instructor, class mismanagement, generalized instructional incompetence, and a policy/supervisory vacuum.

The method utilized in this study, group interviews to generate items and individual interviews to derive quantifiable data, seems to have been effective. Reexamination of the items however, shows two noteworthy gross ambiguities among the items. Item 1, Gave test items on content not covered in class, is ambiguous. One might ask, "What's wrong with that, if the students were assigned to read a book independently?" It may be unclear as to what is meant by the phrase "in class". Is that to be taken literally or does that mean "in the course?" Also Item 3, Taught by reading ver batim from a book is unclear. One might ask, "How much ver batim reading was done?" Surely, the occasional reading of a short

excerpt would hardly seem injust, but do some instructors go on endlessly in this teaching mode? These ambiguities have a somewhat attenuating effect on the validity of these two items. Sad but true, both these items are at the top of the list with regard to reported incidence among instructors.

Interpretation of Findings

The range of incidence of the sixteen injustices, from 24 to 56 per cent of the students, shows that the injustices happen with sufficient frequency to justify the attention of those concerned with collegiate instruction. The range of the percentages of students who find the injustices serious, from 59 to 93 per cent, shows that students are really bothered by them--- these are injustices which are truly gross.

The nature of the injustices themselves is of great interest. They focus upon instructional incompetence and insensitive, unfair treatment of students. One observes a consumerist attitude on the part of students toward their instruction and instructors. Apparently, they come to an instructional scene with the reasonable expectation of receiving meaningful, well-organized instruction, administered fairly and with sensitivity to their problems. Sometimes their expectations are not met. The situation of the student

is somewhat analogous to shopping at a department store, perhaps the only one convenient, where some of the merchandise is shabby, some of the salespeople rude, and store policies for return or exchange of merchandise are one-sided in favor of the store. It should be noted that in the interview phase of this study the overwhelming majority of the students interviewed indicated implicitly or explicitly that they perceived themselves to be consumers of education experiences.

It is also of interest to note which types of instructor behavior were <u>not</u> considered by students to be gross injustices. The investigators expected students to complain about boring instructors who made dull, dry presentations from yellowed notes from another era. This was not the case. In fact, only two items dealt with the entire realm of content presentation: reading from a book (3) and inability to demonstrate (13). Apparently it is the management style rather than the presentation style which draws the higher criticism from students.

There were no real surprises found in the results of the crosstabular analysis although the findings do provide a fertile field for causal speculations. Nor are there many surprises among the student reactions to the injustices. One wonders, however,

about the degree of observed apathy among the majority of the students as exhibited by their ignoring the injustices. Why so? Were these students born apathetic, did they achieve apathy, or was apathy thrust upon them? How much of their attitude can be explained by geographical and/or generational considerations. How would students on the West Coast in the 1960's have responded?

Further Research

There are many more questions---some rhetorical, some researchable---which are generated from the present findings. How much variance is there among colleges regarding the gross injustices perceived by their respective students? Why do students respond the way they do? At what class level do which injustices predominate? Also, at what professorial level do they predominate? Is the type of course format (lecture, lab, studio) a significant variable? And why do instructors perpetuate these injustices? What effect do ignorance and tradition have on their behavior?

Moreover, in order to make this present study more meaningful and perhaps initiate an honest, open dialogue between faculty and students, the investigators recommend that a follow up study be undertaken in which

instructors are asked what behaviors do students engage in which instructors perceive as unfair, unjust, inconsiderate or inequitable.

Significance of this study

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this study is the fact that it was actually done. As far as the investigators are aware, this is the first attempt to determine systematically the specific negative behavioral acts which take place in a collegiate instructional setting.

There appears to be a great potential usefulness to this type of data. For faculty evaluation in a summative mode, the perpetration of gross injustices can be used as negative evidence against the instructor as suggested by Scriven (1973)*. In a formative mode, this type of data can be used to alert those concerned to the existence of gross injustices. Following this awareness stage, goals could be set in which the eradication of the injustices would be attempted. Careful reflection upon the nature of the injustices shows that they seem to be acts which really need not have taken

*In the Scriven paper, such negative evidence is referred to as "black marks".

place; many of the acts seem to be the result of a lack of instructor training and/or experience. Departments and/or colleges can develop policies which would help solve items 6, 7, and 14. Instructors can be helped to develop operational plans which would take care of 1, 4, 5, 12, 15 and 16. Some practice or additional training would help eliminate 3 and 13. And a careful self-monitoring of one's behavior could eliminate the remaining items: 2, 9, 10, 11. The concept of instructional development would be strengthened if attention were focused not just on method of presentation as is typically the case but also on avoiding those actions considered offensive to students which ultimately militate against the stated cognitive and effective goals of instruction.

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Table 1

Sixteen Gross Injustices in Order of Number of Students Who Experienced Each, With Category of Injustice

	Injustices	Category	Students N	Students %
1.	Gave test items on content not covered in class.	II	128	56
2.	Spoke at length about personal matters having nothing to do with the course	IA	116	51
3.	Taught by reading *ver batim* from a book.	IA	114	50
4.	Mismanaged the class time during the quarter so that near the end the course content came at a hectic pace.	IA	112	49
5.	Required you to buy a book, perhaps an expensive one, and then never used it in the course.	II	105	46
6.	Demanded much more work than was warranted by the credit offered by the course	II	101	44
7.	Taught a course whose content had very little to do with the title or catalogue description.	IA	71	31
8.	Changed the course objectives or grading criteria during the quarter.	II	70	31
9.	Spoke negatively about a student in front of other students.	IB	65	28
10.	Encouraged you to speak out in class, but when you did, he ridiculed you or otherwise embarrassed you.	IB	63	27
11.	Was unable to admit that he had made an error although it was apparent that he had done so.	IA	63	27

Table 1 (Cont.)

	Injustices	Category	Students N	Students %
12.	Required you to attend every class session but missed class sessions himself without any excuses.	II	62	27
13.	Was unable to demonstrate something he expected you to be able to do.	IA	59	26
14.	Told the class that the course was so hard that he expected many of the students would be unable to pass it and they should drop the course.	IB	59	26
15.	Lowered your grade as a result of your exceeding the number of absences permitted.	II	54	24
16.	Evaluated your achievement in a class but would not tell you the basis for his evaluation.	II	54	24

Table 2

Revised Listing of Sixteen Injustices in Order of Students Experiencing Each Very Frequently or Frequently

	Injustices	Category	Students N	Students %
1.	Demanded much more work than was warranted by the credit offered by the course.	II	112	49
2.	Mismanaged the class time during the quarter so that near the end the course content came at a hectic pace.	IA	109	48
3.	Taught by reading *ver batim* from a book.	IA	109	48
4.	Gave test items on content not covered in class.	II	103	45
5.	Spoke at length about personal matters having nothing to do with the course.	IA	80	35
6.	Required you to buy a book, perhaps an expensive one, and then never used it in the course.	II	76	33
7.	Evaluated your achievement in a class but would not tell you the basis for his evaluation.	II	69	30
8.	Encouraged you to speak out in class, but when you did, he ridiculed you or otherwise embarrassed you.	IB	65	28
9.	Required you to attend every class session but missed class sessions himself without any excuses.	II	56	24
10.	Taught a course whose content had very little to do with the title or catalogue description.	IA	54	24

Table 2 (Cont.)

	Injustices	Category	Students N	Students %
11.	Lowered your grade as a result of your exceeding the number of absences permitted.	II	53	23
12.	Was unable to demonstrate something he expected you to be able to do.	IA	44	19
13.	Spoke negatively about a student in front of other students.	IB	42	18
14.	Told the class that the course was so hard that he expected many of the students would be unable to pass it and they should drop the course.	IB	35	15
15.	Was unable to admit that he had made an error although it was apparent that he had done so.	IA	31	14
16.	Changed the course objectives or grading criteria during the quarter.	II	29	13

Table 3

Revised Listing of Sixteen Injustices in Order of Number of Students Rating Each as Very Serious or Moderately Serious

	Injustices	Category	Students N	Students %
1.	Demanded much more work than was warranted by the credit offered by the course.	II	212	93
2.	Lowered your grade as a result of your exceeding the number of absences permitted.	II	204	89
3.	Mismanaged the class time during the quarter so that near the end the course content came at a hectic pace.	IA	197	86
4.	Encouraged you to speak out in class, but when you did, he ridiculed you or otherwise embarrassed you.	IB	185	81
5.	Gave test items on content not covered in class.	II	183	80
6.	Evaluated your achievement in a class but would not tell you the basis for his evaluation.	II	183	80
7.	Told the class that the course was so hard that he expected many of the students would be unable to pass it and they should drop the course.	IB	182	79
8.	Was unable to demonstrate something he expected you to be able to do.	IA	171	75
9.	Required you to buy a book, perhaps an expensive one, and then never used it in the course.	II	167	73
10.	Spoke negatively about a student in front of other students.	IB	166	72

Table 3 (cont.)

	Injustices	Category	Students N	Students %
11.	Taught by reading *ver batim* from a book.	IA	163	71
12.	Taught a course whose content had very little to do with the title or catalogue description.	IA	150	66
13.	Was unable to admit that he had made an error although it was apparent that he had done so.	IA	149	65
14.	Required you to attend every class session but missed class sessions himself without any excuses.	II	148	65
15.	Spoke at length about personal matters having nothing to do with the course.	IA	146	64
16.	Changed the course objectives or grading criteria during the quarter.	II	136	59